

HABS
WASH,
27-TACO
3-

Tacoma Rhodes Tower
(Tacoma Municipal Administration Building)
(Rhodes Medical Arts Tower)
(Rhodes Medical Arts Building)
740 Saint Helens Avenue
Tacoma
Pierce County
Washington

HABS No. WA-173

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

AMERICA'S CITY HALL PROJECT

Narrative Data
Medical Arts Building
Tacoma, Washington

Name: Tacoma Rhodes Tower was the original name for the City of Tacoma's entry into the America's City Hall Project. Secondary names were the Rhodes Medical Arts Tower and the Rhodes Medical Arts Building. The Medical Arts Building is the most common name for the structure and is the name that will be utilized throughout this narrative. During the spring of this year, the Tacoma City Council selected and adopted a new name for the building, the Tacoma Municipal Administration Building.

Location: 740 St. Helens Avenue
Tacoma, Pierce County, Washington 98402

The building is bounded on two sides by major arterial streets; St. Helens Avenue and Market Street. The main entrance is located on St. Helens, a second entryway is situated on Market.

Present
Owner: City of Tacoma, Washington

Present
Occupant: City of Tacoma general municipal government offices

Present
Use: City government functions

Significance: During the late 1920's, Tacoma had no single building where the city's physicians could have their offices. The construction of the Medical Arts Building met this need and continued to do so until the late 1970's when the City purchased the structure for its new city government center.

The Medical Arts Building was built during depths of the Depression and is sometimes referred to as the "Spirit of 1931." In the years 1930-1931, this construction gave jobs to 750 men and cost close to \$2 million. This allowed Tacoma to be represented by a high percentage of new construction for this time period when compared with other west coast cities with populations of 100,000 or more.

The construction of the Medical Arts Building in 1931 was viewed as a significant step in revitalizing the city's central business district. It was centrally located and its existence attracted many visitors and shoppers to downtown Tacoma. With the City's purchase of the building in 1977 to house its municipal offices, the Medical Arts Building is again being viewed as a catalyst in the revitalization of Tacoma's central business district.

Architecturally, the Medical Arts Building has always been a predominant figure in Tacoma's sky-line. Noted for its exterior and interior Art Deco styling, the building was designed to take advantage of the latest construction technology. The residents of Tacoma have always been proud of the Medical Arts Building, even more so when it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in December, 1978. It's proud existence will continue when it takes on its new role as the City of Tacoma's new city hall.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATIONA. Physical History1. Date of Erection:

When the Medical Arts Building was formally opened on Saturday, January 31, 1931, area newspapers heralded the occasion as one of major events of the year. "Medical Building is achievement," "outstanding construction work of 1930," "impressive monument to progress" were a few of the tabloids that appeared at the time. The construction of the Medical Arts Building was one of the strong influences that kept economic conditions in Tacoma relatively stable during the Depression years.

2. Architect:

The October 29, 1929 edition of the Tacoma Times noted that the firm of Heath, Gove and Bell of Tacoma, in collaboration with John Graham of Seattle, were the architects for the Medical Arts Building. As consulting architects, Heath, Gove and Bell were nationally known, having been represented by buildings in 47 states, including Alaska. They designed the Puget Sound National Bank Building in downtown Tacoma, then the tallest building west of the Mississippi. In 1909, the firm designed the Stadium Bowl, the second bowl in the United States and the only one designed around the concept of a Greek amphitheater. Stadium Bowl now serves as the athletic field for Stadium High School where it commands a magnificent view of Tacoma's Commencement Bay.

The lead architect for the Medical Arts Building project was John Graham, Sr. of Seattle, Washington, who had offices in Detroit and Shanghai. He was born in Liverpool and received his college degree on the Isle of Mann. He received his architectural training through the British and European apprenticeship system. In 1900, he came to America where he opened an office in Seattle. This became, and still remains, the firm's home office. At one point in his early career, Graham served as the chief architect for the Ford Motor Company where he designed over 30 plants, including the major plant at Highland Park, Michigan. He also designed several hospitals, including the Virginia Mason Hospital in Seattle.

In collaborating their expertise, the firms of John Graham and Heath, Gove and Bell, formed a fortuitous combination of talent and technical knowledge which included understanding the conditions of building construction in a potential area for earthquake occurrences.

3. Builder, Contractor, Suppliers:

The Howard S. Wright Construction Co. of Seattle, Washington, built the Medical Arts Building, a structure of reinforced concrete. The cladding is precast stone tile, cast on site from colored gravel and sand and anchored to the concrete of the frame. The tiles are approximately 18 inches by 30 inches. Other decorative tiles, which accentuate various portions of the building, were also cast on site. The cast stone cladding is a warm beige and gives a subtle texture to the structure while contrasting with the rich undulating variations of Art Deco motifs. The exterior decoration was made from the material of the building itself and gives a feeling of organic growth.

4. Original Plans and Construction:

The Medical Arts Building is a 17 story structure of reinforced concrete construction, situated in the middle of a flatiron block. The average depth of the building is 122 feet. Its design stresses the vertical note; emphasizing the height of the tower. Constructed on an "L" shape plan, the central portion of the tower rises to 16 stories. On the left it is offset to 11 floors and on the right, six floors. The 17th floor houses the elevator mechanisms. Stores and shops were arranged on the first two floors and were provided with modern show windows and display features. The complete set of the building's original plans are located with the City of Tacoma Public Works Department.

5. Alterations and Additions:

Facelifting of the Medical Arts Building began in spring of 1968. Approximately \$200,000 was spent on the remodeling and modernization project, which eliminated the storefronts and display windows on Market and St. Helens Street frontages. The building entrances were provided with new light bronze aluminum sash doors accented with lead sash panes and outlined with amber glass. New lighting in these areas increased the existing illumination by sixfold. Stronger lighting in the lobbies further enhanced the marble walls and gold ceiling. Removal of the dark wooden moldings in the upper corridors made the halls appear wider. The building was carpeted throughout in tones of red, rust and gold.

In July, 1977, the City of Tacoma purchased the Medical Arts Building to house its general municipal offices. The firm of Pearson and Richards was retained to revamp the building to accommodate the City departments. The original first floor auditorium was envisioned, and now serves, as the City Council Chambers.

In September, 1978, the \$3.3 million massive remodeling project began. Walls were torn out on five floors and were remodeled on the open space concept. An automatic sprinkler system was installed to protect the entire building. Heat pumps were mounted on the ceiling along with the new lighting system. Heating, air-conditioning, ventilation and electrical systems were updated. All the windows were replaced.

The building is still undergoing remodeling. Completion is scheduled for early 1982. As the various floors are completed, City offices are being relocated from the existing municipal building. To date, 10 City departments have already moved into their new spaces. The Rushforth Construction Company was awarded the contract for this latest renovation effort.

B. Historical Context:

In 1929, the concept of a full-service building in the central business district, which would house the facilities to serve all health needs, was implemented by a group of farsighted businessmen from Tacoma and Seattle, Washington, and investors from the Northwest and East through the financial house of Drumheller, Erlichman and White. The inspiration for a medical tower came from the officers of the United Rhodes Realty Corporation, a subsidiary of the United Pacific Corporation, now the Reliance Insurance Company. The men involved were Henry A. Rhodes, Chairman of the Board, Ben B. Erlichman, President, Wilmer C. Hewitt, Vice President, and A. M. Fraser, Secretary-Treasurer.

The site chosen for the Medical Arts Building was centrally located and vital to the central business district. Tacoma had good hospitals, but as yet no single building where its 150 doctors could have offices. A small hospital with two operating rooms, private rooms, wards for 15 patients, sterilizing room and kitchen, was located on the fifth floor. An auditorium, laboratories, covered parking for 175 cars, a pharmacy, library and facilities for opticians completed the services provided within the building.

The Medical Arts Building has always been an important architectural structure in the Northwest and a major building in the city of Tacoma. Up until 1980 the building still contained medical offices. It is now being re-adapted for use as Tacoma's city hall.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATIONA. Description of Exterior

(Please refer to Part I.A.3 and Part I.A.4 above.)

The style of the Medical Arts Building is that which was prevalent at the time of its construction. American architecture of the 1920's and 1930's combined the strong vertical with the contemporary, and traditional materials such as bronze, steel, aluminum and chromium with marble, plaster and gold leaf. The result was essentially a commercial style where the design complements the function. Today, this architectural style with its geometric decoration is called "New York Art Deco," due to the great number of outstanding examples found in New York. In the West, Tacoma's Medical Arts Building fits this pattern.

B. Description of the Interior

In the Medical Arts Building the motifs of the exterior decoration are repeated again and again in the first and second floor lobbies. The three story circular black granite staircase is graced with a 35 foot bronze and glass light fixture which is hung on three bronze rods from a cast plaster sunburst whose traditional and innovative forms are covered with gold leaf in shades of copper, soft green and yellow gold. The bronze ballisters create a feeling of movement through their undulating shapes.

The gold color scheme of the ceilings contrasts with the deep tones of the rose tavernelle marble (a dark mottled background with fine markings of rose and lighter colored stone) imported from France for the walls of the foyer. Belgian black marble was used for the base and trims. The floors of Roman travertine marble provide a light accent. The heavy bronze elevator doors contribute to the color scheme of the lobbies and carry out the dignity and character of the building.

Functionally, every effort to maintain a degree of silence was made throughout the construction of this building. The halls of the floors were of a special cork-like composition to be as sound absorbing as possible. A circulating air system changed the air six times an hour, providing warmth in the winter and coolness in the summer. A fire escape with large unglassed windows opening into air space over the southwest corner of the building was an innovative safety feature of the Medical Arts Building. The four elevators were quoted as being the most efficient mechanisms of their day.

C. Site:

The site chosen for the Medical Arts Building is irregular. It runs between two streets, with 175 feet of frontage on St. Helens Avenue on the east and 185 feet on Market to the west. Because the site rises sharply to the north and also to the west going up the hill in the opposite direction, entrances on both streets became a logical necessity. Architecturally, the one from Market is not as important as that from St. Helens; however, it was practical for patients arriving by ambulance or those using the interior entrance from the garage which fronts on Market Street.

The building is located in the heart of Tacoma's central business district and is a main focal point, both physically and socially, for the area. As part of the last renovation plans for the Medical Arts, plantings are scheduled to be provided along Market Street, St. Helens Avenue and on the 12th floor balcony. Re-spacing of the existing planters and adding new ones along the sidewalks is envisioned. Low planting material would be placed around the perimeter of the balcony.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Architectural Drawings Include the Date and Location:

The original architectural drawings for the Medical Arts Building are dated February 8, 1930.

The original drawings are located within the City of Tacoma Public Works Department, County-City Building, Tacoma, Washington 98402.

B. Early Views:

See attached.

C. Bibliography:

Books

Anonymous, Who's Who in the State of Washington, 1939-1940, edited by Gordon Barteau, Seattle, 1939.

Menten, Theodore, The Art Deco Style, New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 1972.

-----, The Sources of Modern Architecture and Design, New York, Washington, Frederick A. Praeger, 1968.

Robinson, Cervin and Rosemarie Haag Bletter, Skyscraper Style Art Deco, New York, Oxford University Press, 1975.

Stewart, Edgar I., Washington Northwest Frontier, III, New York, Lewis Historical Publishing Co., Inc., 1957.

Periodicals

Seattle Post-Intelligencer, March 22, 1950; March 23, 1950.

Seattle Times, August 4, 1929.

Tacoma Ledger, August 1, 1929; November 30, 1930; December 10, 1930; January 2, 1931.

Tacoma News Tribune, April 13, 1932; January 30, 1941; December 1, 1941; March 28, 1953; April 5, 1953; May 2, 1954; August 2, 1955; July 14, 1957; March 31, 1968; February 27, 1977.

Tacoma Times, August 2, 1929; September 9, 1929; January 3, 1931; January 29, 1941.

Unpublished Documents (Acquired from John Graham and Company,
1110 Third Avenue, Seattle, Washington.)

John Graham Job Numbers (1-708), John Graham and Company
Technical Files, July 11, 1974.

Reguso, Connie, "John Graham Company Employee's Manual,"
1976.

Retrepo, Alicia and Thomas Phillips, "John Graham, Jr."
(preliminary draft of a report by two University of
Washington students), 1977.

Historical Photos

City of Tacoma Public Library, Pacific Northwest Room.
Washington State Historical Society, Reference Library.
Old Town Photo studio, Old Photos Collection.

Prepared by:

Karie A. Hayashi

Karie A. Hayashi
Urban Planner II
City of Tacoma Planning Department
August 17, 1981